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SUBJECT: FIJI'S DRAFT PEOPLES CHARTER RELEASED

¶1. (U) Summary. The National Council for Building a better Fiji (NCBBF) unveiled its draft Peoples Charter for Change and Progress on August 5. The original plan to have the Charter voted on by the people of Fiji has gone by the wayside. NCBBF will instead conduct six weeks of public consultations before delivering the Charter to the President in late September. The draft Charter affirms that the Constitution is "the supreme law of Fiji." However, some recommendations, such as changing the voting system, can only be accomplished by amending Fiji's constitution, which in turn can only be accomplished by parliament. How exactly the IG intends to implement the Charter proposals remains a subject of much speculation. Meanwhile, the NCBBF announced that it has no money to conduct six weeks of consultations and is looking for donors. In a perhaps related event, the IG announced that the Great Council of Chiefs will not meet in August as previously announced because leaders from only three of Fiji's fourteen provinces have agreed to participate. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The NCBBF was convened early this year, with forty members drawn from across society and is co-chaired by Commodore Bainimarama and the head of Fiji's Catholic Church. The NCBBF itself has convened five times while assorted smaller "teams" and "committees" have also met regularly to focus on specific areas identified by the IG/army as being particularly in need of reform. These issues include electoral reform, land reform, public sector reform and entrenching the role of the army in Fiji's public life. From the outset, the NCBBF's independence has been questioned, particularly given that that PM Bainimarama has co-chaired the entire process, and the various task forces have invariably been co-chaired by IG ministers and high ranking military officers. Three of Fiji's prominent political parties, the SDL, NFP and UPP, have boycotted the process, as has the Methodist church. The NCBBF endorsed and approved the publication of the People's Charter at the meeting ending August 5.

Eleven Pillars & Reforms

¶3. (U) The draft Peoples Charter is an ambitious document. The NCBBF explains that the goal of the Charter is to "strengthen the Constitution." Many of the initiatives, such as reducing poverty and improving the public service, are commendable; many have been included in various electoral platforms and governments for years. Perhaps the most significant proposal is electoral reform and the removal of communal or ethnic based voting, which would require an amendment to Fiji's constitution. The Charter proposes a twelve-principle broad-based strategy designed to end the cycle of coups, including (ambitiously) removing the "political, economic and social conditions for coups," as well as strengthening the sanctions against those who conduct them. The draft also proposes a common name for all citizens - "Fijians", which historically denoted only indigenous Fijians. Catering to its base, the Charter also proposes "enhancing the role of the army in national development through legislative reform to re-define its role."

State of the Nation & Economy (SNE) Report

¶4. (U) In addition to the Peoples Charter, the NCBBF also endorsed a State of the Nation and Economy report (SNE) on August 5. According to the communique, the SNE -- which has not been made public -- formed the basis for the draft Peoples Charter. The communique

claims that during months of outreach throughout Fiji, NCBBF teams received feedback from more than 1,000 villages and settlements around Fiji, and that more than 200 people contributed during NCBBF working group meetings to the analysis of problems and issues discussed in the report.

Great Council of Chiefs Will Not Meet

15. (U) In a perhaps related event, the IG announced August 6 that the GCC would not meet in August as planned. Despite months of lobbying by an IG taskforce, only three of Fiji's fourteen provinces were willing to join the "new look" GCC, bringing the total far short of the requisite 32 that would constitute a quorum. The leaders of most provinces remain strongly opposed to the IG's restructuring of the GCC -- a traditional body that they believe should only be changed by the chiefs themselves not the government.

16. Comment GCC: Given this background, and despite the urgent need for the GCC to select a new vice president, PM Bainimarama is probably pleased that the GCC will not assemble in the near term, thereby avoiding a possible challenge to his authority from traditional leaders.

17. (U) Comment Charter: While the draft Charter affirms that the constitution "is the supreme law of Fiji," many of the proposed reforms can only happen with an elected Parliament passing a bill to amend the constitution. If the IG truly seeks to abide by the constitution, they will have no choice but to recall Fiji's parliament, a parliament controlled by Qarase's SDL party and not favorably inclined towards the IG or the NCBBF and its proposed reforms. The IG and NCBBF have repeatedly said that the Commonwealth and UN will be organizing a "President's Forum" later this year to discuss electoral reform. Opposition political parties have expressed an interest in engaging, but are pushing for a more comprehensive dialogue. The issue of how these reforms might be incorporated into the constitution remains very much a subject to debate. What is less a subject of debate is whether they will happen: The IG has made it quite clear that they will happen. End comment.

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